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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how Western Washington University's Woodring College of Education designed an elementary Master in Education program to meet the needs of practicing teachers. Data gathering activities included systemic review of the graduate catalog's programs and enrollment; surveys of administrators and educators who completed Master's degrees; and information-sharing meetings with teachers and administrators from area public schools. A cohort model of up to 25 students to complete the courses and program over 6 consecutive quarters was developed. Classes were held on weekends during the academic year and Full-time during the summer. Candidates learned to implement innovative literacy assessment and evaluation techniques, develop superior literacy-based curricula, design and implement action research literacy projects in their schools, and understand social, psychological, and philosophical theories related to literacy and child development. Faculty communicated about the cohort through writing and meetings, and they team taught some classes. A mid-program evaluation occurred with the first cohort, and an exit evaluation is being planned. Students liked the weekend format. They appreciated the overall program design and faculty responsiveness. They saw connections between theories, research, and classroom practice. They responded positively to the cohort model. Challenges included gaining access to the library on weekends, faculty resistance to working on weekends, and controversy over students' culminating projects. (SM)

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Redesigning Masters of Education Programs to Meet the Needs of Classroom Teachers: The Place of Action Research

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Introduction:

As faculty on college campuses, our positions are defined by the three tenets of the professorate: teaching, research, and service. Countless debates underscore the importance of each. The possibility of designing Masters programs for teachers in which they take action based on new knowledge they have created is the ultimate goal of graduate level programs. Mentoring teachers and actively participating in classroom research in these graduate programs has the distinct possibility of melding the three components of the professorate.

This new research paradigm, action research, challenges the experimental model of research that ignores the context of the classroom, proposes controlled experiments, and compiles mountains of statistics, but does little to affect classroom teachers. Teacher research is a unique genre that links reflection, inquiry, and action, with the potential to improve practice. Unfortunately, teacher research is not always respected in the educational community.

Action research gives teachers voice in the scholarship arena and the right to be scholars on their own terms. "The teacher-research movement has made it possible for teachers to make a difference" (Patterson, Minnick Santa, Short, Smith, 1993, p. vii). No longer is the teacher just a technician, but a creator of new knowledge that she/he can actually use. Action research eliminates the theory-to-practice gap, sometimes estimated at 5-6 years from research to implementation in classrooms. Action based on newly created knowledge is the goal often stated in literature, but the not-often-stated goal is to develop the best possible education for our children.

Problem:

Enrollment in the Masters of Education elementary programs at Woodring College of Education had fallen. Class sizes were small and hard to justify for the amount of student credit hours generated. In 1994, all the Masters of Education programs were put on moratorium at the initiation of the department, the college dean, and the graduate dean and council, in order that the faculty could study the existing programs, research the potential student pool to draw from for graduate education, and revamp the programs to better serve students' stated needs and requirements.

For a variety of reasons, evidence indicated that teachers in the districts within a 100 mile radius were receiving Master of Education degrees, but they were choosing market-oriented private colleges from inside and outside the state with out-reach Masters programs. Elements of competing programs consisted of: weekend delivery format; cohort concept; ability to work collaboratively with colleagues across schools and levels (K-12); facilitative instead of directive roles of faculty and mentors; no GRE or Miller Analogy required; diversity of delivery--using different resources, people with expertise, variety of presenters and ways of presenting; tuition cuts for teams from buildings and/or first year of classes; credit for previous masters level work; i.e., accepting up to 12 credit hours of 500 level course work.

Our challenge was to design and provide a Master in Education program that would meet the stated needs of practicing teachers in terms of format and delivery, and provide the rigor and intellectual stimulation and challenge that is necessary for the professional development and growth of educators.

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Data Gathering/Program Development:

Data gathering activities included: systematic review of the graduate catalog's programs and enrollment; survey of administrators and educators who had completed Masters degrees; and three information sharing meetings were held with teachers and administrators from the area public school districts. We developed a steering committee of teachers and faculty to help with the actual design of the program once an area of focus--literacy learning and teaching--was determined. The changes proposed reflected our willingness to provide a high quality and consistent program that fit in the current graduate school structure.

Based on input from the steering committee and faculty members, we adopted a cohort model of up to 25 students who would complete the courses and the program over a specified length of time together. The program was designed to be completed over six consecutive quarters, with a winter quarter start-up, and one full-time summer (in the first year) intensive course of study. We adopted a weekend format of delivery for the academic year quarters (two weekends a month). The summer quarter was full-time during the regular summer session.

Candidates in the program learn to implement innovative literacy assessment and evaluation techniques, develop superior literacy-based curriculums, design and implement action research literacy projects in their schools and classrooms, and understand the social, psychological and philosophical theories related to literacy and child development.

To provide continuity between classes, faculty communicated about the cohort through writing and meetings. Faculty worked closely together and team taught some classes. Students in the program completed exit cards after each class as a way to communicate their thoughts. These cards were passed to faculty in the program so we could deal with issues as they evolved. Major projects were also carried from one class to another to maintain connections.

Outcomes and Challenges:

A mid-program evaluation was conducted with the first cohort and an exit evaluation is planned as well. As the first cycle nears completion and the second cycle begins, several positive and challenging elements of this format have been identified:

Positive Elements:

- Students continue to respond positively to the weekend format. They are able to find a balance between their work, family obligations, and academic demands.
- Students see connections between the theories, research and classroom practices they are learning about and their own work in classrooms and educational settings.
- Students have commented on the overall design and cohesiveness of the program through the course sequence and delivery.
- Students state their appreciation of the personal attention they and their work receives, and the responsiveness of faculty who teach in the program. The students and faculty maintain contact between classes during the academic year through memos, e-mail, telephone calls, and classroom visits. The summer session allows for more frequent contact and advising on campus.
- Students respond positively to the cohort model. Many have made close professional and personal bonds as they have progressed through the program. They have created study groups and car pools based on geographic location. Members of the first cohort also initiated the formation of a Woodring Graduate Student Association that includes graduate students from the various Woodring College of Education programs.

Challenging Elements:

- Rather than design a new structure, we had to develop the program within the existing graduate structure of 48 credit hours -- similar to putting a square peg in a round hole. There has been a huge struggle concerning the students' culminating project. We wanted a seminar paper with an action research field project and no option for a thesis.
- Access to the library and other administrative offices is difficult for students who are here only on weekends. Most of our students commute a fair distance to come to classes, and do not have the time during the week to come to the library when it is open. They find it challenging to do the research required of them, particularly in the first two quarters due to the limited time the library is open when they are actually on campus. Some would laugh at our library hours when compared to major institutions.
- The cohort weekend format requires a different kind of mind-set and work load for faculty. Some of the adjustments that faculty make include working alone on the weekends, planning for 13 hours of concentrated contact with students once a month, providing for continuity and cohesiveness among other classes and faculty, and maintaining energy levels.
- This program requires considerable time, effort and commitment on the students' parts for the six quarters they are in the program. Due to the cohort structure and the fixed sequence of courses that are offered once a year, there is little room for rotating in and out of the program or opting to take fewer classes than are set for any given quarter.
- We are working to distribute the student advising load and guidance of the students' research projects and final seminar papers among faculty in elementary education.
- We are considering what elements of the total elementary graduate program offerings might be reconceptualized and implemented in the future; e.g., infusing technology, developing other areas of concentration within elementary education, and trying alternative methods of delivery.

Links to classroom practice:

The graduate program at Western Washington University emphasizes the development of professionals who are teacher-researchers and who create their own knowledge and understanding of their classrooms. Some of students' action research projects include:

- Working in Job Corps with ESL learners using literature circles and children's literature to develop reading strategies for students.
- Redesigning and implementing a spelling program in a Writer's Workshop. The project shows dramatic growth of students as spellers.
- Implementing literature circles in class, using pre-post tests on attitude toward reading and parent and student interviews to collect data. Imbedded case studies focus on three students.

These teachers are also master teachers, they can become mentoring teachers in classrooms where preservice teachers do their internships; the college can draw on them for participating in courses on campus --to talk about and share their research and knowledge; they disseminate their projects in other forums--faculty development, parent education, family literacy development; and they are involved in program development for organizations like Head Start and Even Start.

Reference:

Patterson, L, Minnick Santa, C, Short, K. G., and Smith, K. (1993). Teachers Are Researchers: Reflection and Action. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.